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ABSTRACT

A three-phase interdisciplinary effort between educators and environmental planners is focusing on the social effects of rural primary school reorganization now occuring in England as a result of a declining birth rate and the resulting need for school closure. A questionnaire mailed nationally to rural Local Education Authorities, cross-community case studies of 24 villages (10 of which still have a primary school), and 'before' and 'after' monitoring studies of the closure of 2 primary schools are providing data on the interaction between schools and communities facing this issue. This study indicates that the effects of school closure are clearly linked to and conditioned by the relations which existed between school and community prior to closure. That is, the social roles of rural schools diminish as the number of pupils decrease, due to less parental involvement and less impetus from staff to stimulate community involvement. Adjustment to the loss of social activities appears to occur quite quickly as people find alternative meeting places. However, it is suggested that the fact that people 'adjust' should not imply they do not feel and resent the loss of the school, both personally and in community terms. Closures affect most groups without regular access to independent transportation, particularly the elderly and young mothers, and in several areas this seems to increase the social strain between these disadvantaged groups and the more affluent and mobile 'newcomers' to rural areas. (NEC)

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Special Interest Group on Rural Education

(1700 hours, Thursday 10 April, in the Sheraton Hotel)

RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL CLOSURES IN ENGLAND

by

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Summary

This paper describes the context, aims, procedures and preliminary findings of a study of the social effects of rural primary school reorganisation in England being carried out by a team of educationists and environmental planners at the University of Aston in Birmingham over a two year period commencing October 1978.

The National Context

During the 1970s the birth rate in the United Kingdom declined steadily by about 25%. When, in early 1976, I first conjectured about the impacts of this trend as far as the formal educational system was concerned, it seemed likely that rural primary schools would be the first sector to experience the most severe and far reaching effects. As a consequence of shifts from labour to capital intensive farming methods and the resulting rural depopulation, there had already been large numbers of rural primary school closures over the post-war years; in England approaching 2000 since 1955. Many of the remaining schools had numbers on roll believed by many educationists to be marginal in terms of educational breadth and viability, so that their continuation was likely to be very sensitive to relatively small demographic changes.

Past rural primary school closures, like those of much of Britain's railway system serving rural areas, had taken place without a great deal of political controversy, but the 1970s saw the growth of rural lobbies which, in their different manifestations, sought to preserve aspects of rural life, not simply for the inhabitants of isolated farmsteads, hamlets and villages, but also to serve the growing numbers of town and city dwellers seeking recreational and leisure facilities. Also the rural school had been viewed as a focal point for social and community activities, so that administrative changes in the provision of children's education could disrupt these in addition to, possibly, aspects of the rural economy as a whole. However, in considering rural school closures, a view of educational facilities as one part of a range of services essential to the satisfactory social and economic as well as educational functioning of rural communities seemed to have been almost non-existent.

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School administration and the curriculum in England is decentralised and is executed by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Of these, some 39 cater for areas having rural characteristics, though the degree of ruralness varies significantly between these Authorities. Each LEA is autonomous regarding the provision of schooling within the framework of the Education Acts which are drafted and approved by central government at Westminster. While the central Department of Education and Science (DES) gives guidance to LEAs as a whole through memoranda, this guidance rarely goes into detail, since implementation is strictly a matter for each LEA. As far as details of the curriculum are concerned, responsibility is effectively delegated by LEAs to their individual school staffs.

In 1977 the DES asked LEAs to review population trends in their own areas in order to consider the possible restructuring of schooling (including nursery education for 3 and 4 year-olds) by assessing costs and benefits on a broad basis. While some further closures and amalgamations of schools seemed very likely, the DES recognised at that time that many local factors needed to be taken into account before such action is proposed. More recently, waves of cuts in public expenditure seem likely to increase pressure for closures, even though the financial savings in each case are relatively small, though largely recurrent through the teachers' salary element.

Hitherto all school closures proposed by LEAs have had to be ratified by the DES under Section 13 of the 1944 Education Act. The present Conservative Government is, however, planning to waive this requirement as a part of its policy to give more autonomy and accountability to local government, which has some significant but not total responsibility for raising funds for education through the rating (i.e. property tax) structure. Such a change seems likely to lead to even greater debate between local interest groups and officials, though it will have of itself no impact upon the coordinated planning of local facilities and services.

Purposes and procedures of the Aston study

Our study arises from three general sets of issues and impacts which surround possible changes in rural primary school provision.

1. Social and community issues

   Since the school is a social and community asset, we hypothesise that it might have a significant role in stemming rural depopulation and in maintaining a desired social diversification and balance in rural communities. The use made of school buildings for extra-curricular and social activities, the role which these play in the life of the community, and the symbolic and psychological importance of the school building and its staff are of importance here.

2. Educational issues

These relate to the level of staffing and other resources provided in the rural primary school, to the quality of pupil experience (only covered in outline by our project), to the problems faced by and the skills required of the teachers working in these locations.

3. Economic and financial issues

These relate not simply to calculations of unit costs of instructing children, but also to the sometimes hidden costs of possible alternative provision and a broader view of the economic and social function of the school in its rural location.

The broad aim of our initial exploratory study is therefore to gain insight into the role which rural primary schools play in helping to sustain and maintain viable local communities, and to assess the implications of alternative patterns of schooling so as to provide some basis for comparing specifically educational effects with the broader social and economic issues.

Operationally, this means:

(a) assembling information on the structure and form of school/community linkages;

(b) describing the character of selected rural primary schools in terms of community involvement, resources, access to school, social interaction of pupils and teachers, character of the curriculum, and unit costs;

(c) identifying the scope and variability of problems currently being experienced by LEAs and their policy responses;

(d) assessing contemporary attitudes towards educational provision among rural community residents;

and

(e) exploring the extent to which facilities other than schools might act as a substitute focus for rural community life.

Our project is an interdisciplinary team effort between educators and environmental planners. The research programme is divided into 3 complementary units, each of which is intended to focus in increasing detail upon the interaction between schools and communities within a representative selection of environmental planning and educational contexts.

Firstly, by means of a detailed postal questionnaire to rurally responsible LEAs, we have endeavoured to survey the national scene with regard to rural primary education within the topics of demographic trends, school closures, size, staffing and buildings policies, finance, and the educational structure. This national survey, in which over 90% of the LEAs contacted have cooperated, gives details of the extent and variability of the problems presently being experienced and the range of policies implemented or under consideration.

Secondly, we are engaged in a number of cross-community case studies drawn from a matrix and involving 24 villages of which 10 still have a primary school, and 12 of which used to have such a school, two of these being closed half way through our study (see below). By using structured interviews and questionnaire-based attitude surveys of teachers, parents and other members of communities, as well as school observation and contextual mapping, we are endeavouring to isolate the impacts of alternative forms of educational reorganisation and provision in a range of planning contexts, ranging from declining remote and sparsely populated areas to some areas close to connubations which are subject to some of the pressures of dormitory growth.

Thirdly, we are monitoring the short-term impacts of the closure in July 1979 of two schools. In this 'before' and 'after' study, which includes work in the 'host' schools and communities, both before and several months after closure, observation, interviews and questionnaires are again being used. Through these monitoring studies we hope to be able to test inferences regarding the roles of rural schools through comparisons with the cross-community case studies.

The remainder of this paper will be specifically concerned with the issue of school closures and is based upon the initial findings of our project, including the first stage of the monitoring exercise.

Principal factors relevant to closure

At the time of the national survey in 1979, up to 100 rural or village-based schools in England were under review, about half of which were at various stages of the Section 13 procedure. This number will undoubtedly have increased as a result of more recent central government economic policy, for an informed estimate suggests that around 1000 schools are being budgeted within the DES for closure over the next 3 years, these being 'mainly primary and urban'. Historically, as a result of declining rolls, closures have been accompanied by the utilisation of spare capacity or the improvement of facilities in neighbouring 'host' schools. However, more recently some LEAs have implemented 'consolidation' schemes, involving the construction of a new area school, often on a centrally located site, to replace a group of several small schools. Another alternative has been 'federal' grouping arrangements involving the daily interchange of staff between several school sites under one headteacher. The relatively short travelling distances involved in rural England often make this feasible.

The policies of LEAs with regard to school closure are difficult to categorise precisely, but about half treat each case on an individual basis, while two were against any further closures pending consideration of wider community aspects. About one third of LEAs treat either 20 or 30 or 40 children on roll as a pointer to closure, and there is little doubt that the one teacher school has almost become a feature of the past, there being less than 50 of these remaining in England out of a primary level stock of about 20,000 schools, though over 600 with between 1.1 and 2.0 full time equivalent teachers. There are indications of a rally of support for the small school with more than one teacher, and of an increased willingness by authorities to listen to local pressure groups and to try to accommodate their views. Nonetheless, in several areas, any school with less than 60 pupils, and allowed 2 teachers plus the headteacher, is still subject to careful scrutiny. One authority, interestingly, uses age group (grade) size rather than total size as a criterion; in this case if the mean age group size is 9 or less, and at least one of 3 further factors is likely to arise within 5 years (resignation/retirement of headteacher, heavy expenditure on maintenance/repair of buildings, satisfactory alternative accommodation/school for children) then the school is proposed for closure. The additional chance of action afforded by teaching staff mobility or retirement, and the subsequent break in continuity of school life, is frequently utilised by LEAs. Increasingly, the need for capital expenditure on buildings, many of which were erected in the Victorian era, is able to augment arguments for closure.

There seems considerable uncertainty regarding the critical numbers of pupils on roll below which the child's education and development of social relationships is likely to suffer. Educational evidence and experience on its own, not however adequately research-based, suggests the following <u>minima</u> for viability:

(i) Nursery (3 to 5 age range) plus infants (5 to 7) of about 15 pupils, one teacher and a nursery assistant.

(ii) First school with age range 4 to 9 of about 30 pupils, two teachers and a nursery assistant. (Some LEAs have 'middle schools', generally for pupils aged 9 to 13.)

(iii) Primary school with age range 5 to 11 of about 45 pupils and 3 teachers.

These staffing ratios would be extraordinarily generous however, for in our survey the pupil:staff ratio averages around 20:1, and, contrary to the generally held belief, rural schools in England are not usually more favourably placed with respect to staffing than the non-rural schools. The popular view is undoubtedly based upon the situation in small rural schools, say those with less than 40 pupils on roll. There are now relatively few of these left, and in our survey we took schools serving a population of 10,000 or less as being 'rural' - a definition viewed with some amazement in Scotland, let alone Australia or mid-western USA - such is the demographic nature of our small country.

Views about the viable size of schools from an educational perspective seem definitely related to the desirability for young children to be exposed to the influence of at least 3 teachers by the age of 11. Teacher quality is thus felt to be a particularly crucial factor in the small school, since children will frequently have the same class teacher for more than one school year. Presently few teachers gain specific help during their training for the particular demands and opportunities of the rural setting. The English rural primary schoolteacher also has relatively few opportunities for in-service development, is less mobile and more insulated professionally than the urban counterpart.

Transport costs and journey times to schools are other obvious factors in the consideration of closures. With the doubling of transport costs over the past 5 years, school closures have from that perspective become less attractive and with, in England, relatively small distances to travel, few primary age children take more than half an hour's journey to and from school.

Cases of Closure

The research team has completed something over half of the planned interviews in the case study areas, so far involving over 200 parent and 400 community households. Limited data from these sources is now presented with regard to the 2 school areas being covered in our short-term monitoring study.

About 75% of the residents of these two village areas live in owner occupied properties, with about 20% in clusters of post-war council housing, the age structure being somewhat skewed towards the over 55s. Details of the two schools closed in the summer of 1979 are shown in Table 1; the net savings resulting from these closures are each estimated to be around 10,000$ per annum.

TABLE 1: TWO RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS CLOSED JULY 1979

Closure Case	A	B
Approximate population served	350	430
Other Amenities	Post Office (open one day per week), pub, church, village hall, playing field	PO/Shop, service station, furniture mart, gift shop, grocery/newsagent, smithy, two pubs, church
On roll at closure	18	17
Households immediately affected	13/115	11/155
School buildings dating from/condition	1881 (extensions 1932) good repair	1825 (extensions 1867, 1872 and 1893) good repair
Nature of amenities	2 classrooms, no playing field; swimming pool and colour TV (both via PTA)	2 rooms, playing field adjacent; minibus (via PTA)
Capitation for consumables	450$	650$ plus 320$ for minibus
Teaching and support staff	Two full time plus aide (15 hr/wk), music specialist (3 hr/wk). Secretary (14 hr/wk), cleaner 14 hr/wk, lunch assistant (7 hr/wk)	Headteacher plus aide for 24 hr/wk and visiting violin teacher 3 hr/wk, cleaner
Opposition to closure	Little apart from those employed due to likely educational stimulation at host school	Intense; under threat since 1962.
Host schools: rolls and distance	68; 4½ miles	80; 3 miles

The significant differences in the attitudes of residents to closure are further elaborated by the data in Table 2.

TABLE 2: PARENTS (AND COMMUNITY) REACTIONS TO CLOSURE (% RESPONSES)

School	A	B
Perceived Reasons for Closure		
Finance	77 (61)	40 (66)
Educational standards	8 (9)	20 (0)
Low pupil numbers	31 (27)	30 (10)
Initial Reactions to Closure		
Against	54	100
In favour	16	0
Feelings at time of Closure		
Pleased	46	0
Worried	8	70
General Opinion on Village School Closures		
Against	31 (18)	100 (65)
In favour	24 (22)	0 (13)
Fear loss to community life	15 (c)	39 (c)
Concern about effects on children	9 (c)	26 (c)
(c) = Combined interview samples N	41	46

Differing patterns regarding the use of the schools for village social activities, partly arising from the fact that case B lacks an adequate village hall (though the ancient smithy is used for some small-scale activities), are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: PARENTS (AND COMMUNITY) USE OF SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES (% RESPONSES)

SCHOOL	A	B
Not attending regular function	100 (91)	30 (0)
Special event attendance in previous year	69 (36)	70 (69)
Never attending a function/meeting	8 (31)	0 (7)
School important personally as meeting place	23 (9)	40 (31)
School unimportant/irrelevant as communal meeting place	70 (48)	30 (28)

Table 4 gives further data about the two case studies regarding anticipated effects of closure. These and other factors will be re-examined when we return to the villages in June.

TABLE 4: ANTICIPATED EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURE (% RESPONSES)

Case	A	B
Children walked to school before closure	100	100
Dissatisfied with new travel arrangements	23	40
Closure will have no real effect on community life	44 (38)	13 (35)
Closure will have no effect on social life of household	100 (81)	90 (79)
Closure will assist 'spiral of decline'	15 (c)	10 (c)
Considered leaving village	26 (c)	5 (c)
Considered leaving village due to school closure	4 (c)	0 (c)

Figures from parent survey; ( ) = Community; (c) = Combined P + C

Somewhat fortuitously, therefore, it will be seen that our 2 monitoring case studies, which are in different LEAs, have significant differences of character. Our other case study areas also illustrate that 'broad brush' policies for rural schooling are inappropriate. A case by case examination is imperative due to the large number of interacting factors clustered within the locational and resource characteristics of the school, the spatial and social characteristics of the community, and the nature of other village facilities.

The effects of school closure identified by our surveys so far are clearly linked to and conditioned by the relations which existed between school and community prior to closure. Perhaps surprisingly, few of our respondents appeared to perceive any link between school closure and the loss of other facilities. There is some evidence that the social roles of rural schools diminish as the pupils on roll decrease, due to less parental involvement, less impetus from staff to stimulate community involvement, and so on. Undoubtedly, the different types of effect have different time scales. Whilst it is difficult to generalise, the survey findings illustrate that frequently many of the fears and problems expressed by parents before closure are quickly resolved as children settle into the new pattern of schooling, the main exception being where there are subsequent changes in policy, such as the withdrawal of free transport. Also, of course, most people's involvement with school ceases when their children leave the school.

The problems at the community level perhaps take longer to resolve. Adjustment to the loss of social activities appears to occur quite quickly as people find alternative meeting places, perhaps withdraw from local activities, or even move away from the village, though the evidence shows that the number of people who express an intention to move from a village because of school closure is extremely small. However, for those people who stay, the fact that they 'adjust' should not be taken to imply that they do not feel and resent the loss of the school, both personally and in community terms. Closures affect most those groups without regular access to independent transport, particularly the elderly and some young mothers, and in several of our case study areas this seems to increase the social strain between these disadvantaged groups and the more affluent and mobile 'newcomers' to rural areas.

Possible policy implicatons

In the past, rationalisation of educational provision, and indeed of other human services, including post-offices, shops, health and library services, have been largely carried out in an ad hoc fashion with little prior research into the likely outcomes of different options. Not surprisingly many have led to considerable local acrimony, which is difficult to appease when there appears to be a limited rationale other than a crude economic one, based almost solely upon unit educational costs rather than upon a broader and more sensitive economic and social analysis. There is always a danger for educational administrators, particularly when working in relative isolation from other service managers, to sacrifice long-term improvement for short-term expediency. This points to the need for detailed research to help to inform and promote compromise solutions which satisfy the requirement of efficient resource utilisation and yet provide continued support for rural communities.

A range of social judgements is inevitably involved in these matters. However, the dilemmas are not adequately resolvable unless the broader social, community, and economic roles which schools play, or might play, in rural areas are more fully understood. Then the wider costs and benefits of particular policies can be evaluated.

From our work we are beginning to be in a position to suggest a range of options which will assist the processes of decision-making in contrasting contexts. It must be emphasised however that we are not engaged in rural advocacy for its own sake, nor are we able to include detailed attention to issues of educational output. Our work is an initial attempt to understand a complex scenario which has elements of situational specificity, and one project will by no means furnish all the necessary understanding.

Our central recommendation seems likely to point to the need for greater coordination in planning the provision of services in rural areas, it being imperative to consider educational provision as an integral part of rural settlement planning and rural socioeconomic development. Other recommendations will include the need for LEAs to develop coherent policies for the community use of rural schools and to increase school permeability and openness. Where further school closures are involved, there will need to be wider consultation and more thought about compensating communities and developing new communal links between residents of the enlarged catchment areas.

The English village school is a declining feature within our heritage and it has changed considerably from former times. Those which still remain are generally thriving educationally and providing useful services to rural communities. Few of those which have closed will reopen during this century, but futurists might contemplate one day a return by many to peasant farming as urban pressures and lifestyles become intolerable, and as the balance of convenient energy sources changes. Or perhaps many will simply decide to spend their days of the post-industrial, educational and leisurite society in the countryside. Then, who knows, the rural school closures of the twentieth century may need to be reversed, for hitherto the growth and decline of the education service has followed other more pervasive social movements.

Acknowledgements

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Further information

It is not appropriate here to give further detailed references which are included in our project's two interim reports dated April 1979 and March 1980, and in a background paper "Education in Rural Areas and the Problem of School Closures", L C Comber, December 1978. These and a project information leaflet can be obtained by the research community from the Department of Educational Enquiry, the University of Aston in Birmingham, Gosta Green, Birmingham, B4 7ET, United Kingdom, inclusive price 15$. The final report on the work should become available in late 1980. (Related work has been executed recently within the OECD project "Education in Sparsely Populated Areas". Mr Comber and Dr Meyenn are presently involved in preparing the English country paper for OECD on the rural aspects of "Education for Local Development", while the proceedings of the OECD/Western Australia Conference "New Directions in Rural Education" held in Perth in November last will shortly become available from the Government Department of Education of Western Australia.)

Educational Enquiry/RCW/LSH

March 1980